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ABSTRACT

Deconstruction is a critical literary theory which focuses on the unintentional meanings of a text and aims to achieve an unprejudiced, value-free vision of the social and political power structures in society that combine to produce the text. The development of such critical skills in advertising students will deepen their ability to judge the quality of their work and the work of others. A series of examples of students' deconstruction of advertisements provide examples of how students can "undress the ad" to (1) show how cultural messages are woven into sales messages, and (2) discuss mythology and symbolism, cultural stereotypes of men and women, and sexual fantasy. Deconstruction holds great promise for raising the standards of professionalism in advertising and for shaping a more scholarly approach to the study of advertising. (SR)

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UNDRESSING THE AD:

A METHOD FOR DECONSTRUCTING ADVERTISEMENTS

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UNDRESSING THE AD:

A METHOD FOR DECONSTRUCTING ADVERTISEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Deconstruction is a form of literary analysis that encourages the reader to use critical thinking skills in analyzing a text. This paper outlines a method for deconstructing advertisements and offers a series of examples of students work. As a research and educational method, deconstruction holds great promise for raising the standards of professionalism in advertising and for shaping a more scholarly approach to the study of advertising.

INTRODUCTION

Deconstruction, a critical theory of European origin (Saussure, 1976; Barthes, 1973; Levi-Strauss, 1970; Faucoult, 1970; Lacan, 1968) is currently the reigning school of literary theory. It's proponents find the real significance of literary texts not in their explicit meaning, nor even in their implied meaning but in their unintentional meanings, as one author states, "in the slips, evasions and false analogies that betray the text's ideology" (McConnell, 1990, p. 100). In essence, deconstruction is a way of reading against the text or as John Fiske (1989) and Stuart Hall (1974) would say, taking an "oppositional" reading. The aim of deconstruction is to achieve an unprejudiced, value-free vision of the social and political power structures in society that combine to produce the text.

While some might question the value of applying principles of deconstruction to advertising texts, the development of these kinds of critical skills in advertising students will deepen their ability to judge the quality of their work and the work of others. In addition, there is ample support for literary and artistic criticism as an academic endeavor. The primary value of criticism is to raise the professional standards in the field. Historically, the role of the critic has been to "stand apart from the vulgarizing, leveling spirit of the age and to guide it to finer, more humane attitudes by the example of his or her own sensibility" (McConnell, 1990 p.104).

While advertising education offers the student an opportunity to learn "how to make an advertisement",

deconstruction offers faculty an opportunity to teach students "how an advertisement means" (Stern, 1989). As Jack Solomon states in The Signs of Our Times,

> As long as you are unable to decode the significance of ordinary things, and as long as you take the signs of your culture at face value, you will continue to be mastered by them. But once you see behind the surface of a sign into its hidden cultural significance, you can free yourself from that sign and perhaps find a new way of looking at the world. You will control the signs of your culture rather than having them control you.
>
> (Solomon, 1988, p.8.)

Deconstructionists draw their analytic techniques mainly from the methods of modern structural linguistics. Techniques of textual analysis which employ semiotics and hermeneutics have been useful for revealing the subtle cultural messages in advertisements (Hall, 1982; Williamson, 1978; Dyer, 1982; Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1986). As Leiss et al (1986) state:

> "Decoding" what is happening in these more complicated message structures requires the use of a method such as semiotics which is sensitive to nuances.
>
> (Leiss et al, 1986. p. 151)

Semiotics, the science of signs, is effective in unearthing subtle cultural messages because it requires the analyst to become an "active receiver" by looking not only at the surface meaning of the advertisement but by extracting the social themes or second messages which more conventional methods like content analysis cannot decipher. Since advertising reflects society, advertisements cannot help but reflect the shared social beliefs of their generative culture. Semiotics is currently the most

powerful means we have of examining culture as it is mirrored in advertising.

The first task of the textual analyst is to devise a system of classification for understanding meaning in the text. While there are any number of ways in which an advertisement can be classified (type of appeal, type of headline, type of layout etc.) the most interesting is to move beyond the surface level to more complex levels of meaning. Gillian Dyer (1982) offers a system for analyzing advertisements by suggesting that there are levels of meaning to any image and the analyst must first peel off the simple, superficial levels to arrive at the more subtle levels of meaning. She describes the levels in this way:

1. Level one is comprised of the primary subject matter. In the case of an advertisement this might be the colors, shapes, people, product, typography and other basic components of an ad. Generally speaking, this might be thought of as the "face value" of the ad.

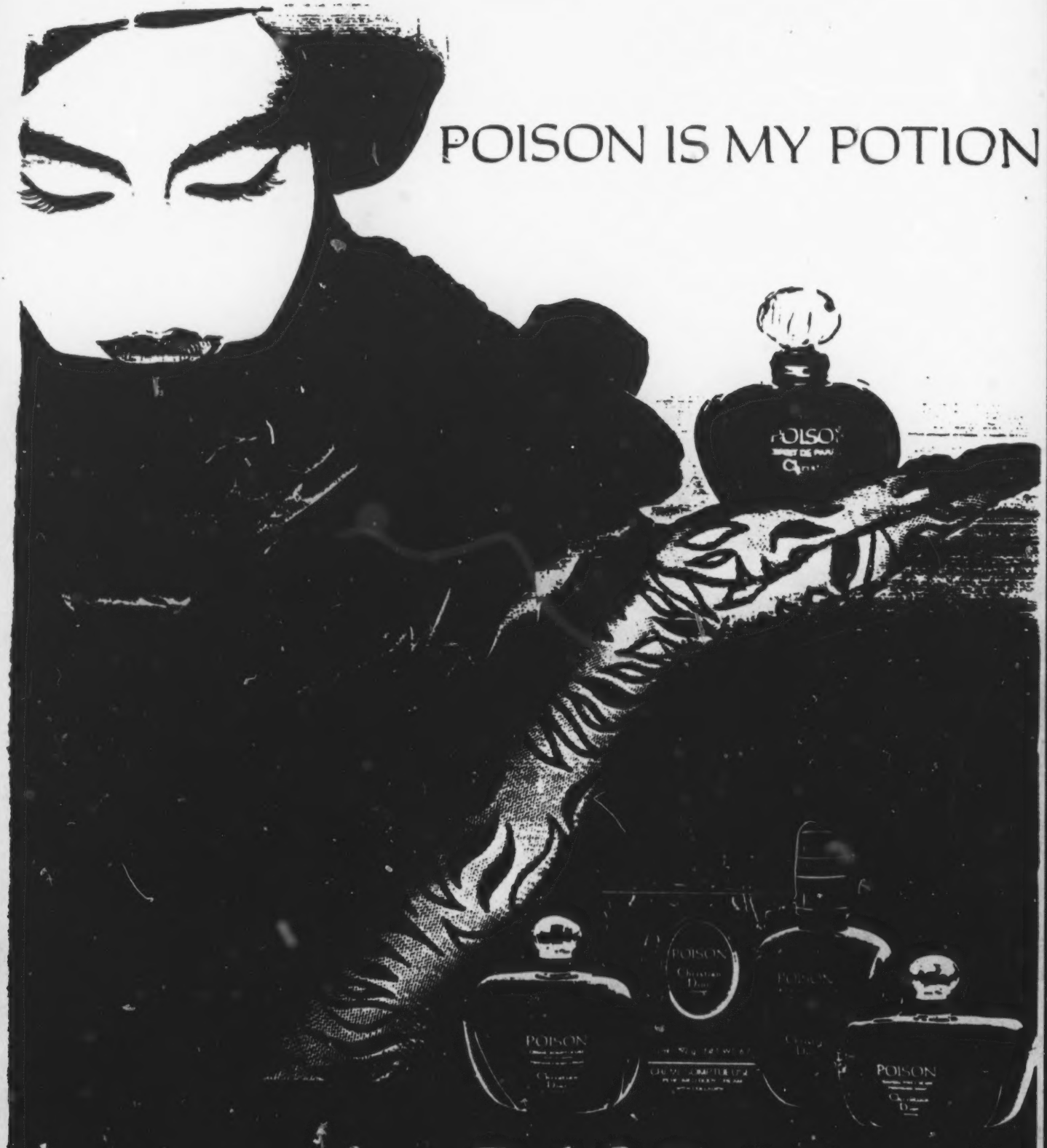
2. Level two relates to the secondary or conventional subject matter which reflects the wider culture. In relation to an advertisement this might involve how the models in the ad are relating to each other or to the product. This level refers to the stories or allegories within the image.

3. The third level of meaning can be described as "those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitudes of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophic persuasion -- unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work" (Dyer, 1982, p.93). This third level refers to the ideologies of a given culture.

APPLYING THE TECHNIQUE

In order see how these levels of analysis operate, a series of examples have been included in this paper. These examples of deconstruction were garnered from advertising students

journals. Each analysis provides us with insight into how advertising creativity works in weaving cultural messages with sales messages. The first example shows how myth and symbolism may be used to create meaning. This ad for POISON Perfume appeared in a recent edition of Vogue magazine.


POISON IS MY POTION
POISON
POISON
POISON
POISON
le nouveau parfum et Bath & Body Essentials
par Christian Dior

This ad for Poison perfume by Christian Dior has a very mysterious nature to it. When examined carefully, I can think of two possible interpretations of this ad. First of all, this ad may be referring to the fairy tale story of Snow White. The woman in the picture has a white face, blue lips, and the clothing surrounding her looks like satin (often the material used to line a coffin). These things all seem to symbolize death. In the story Snow White is given an apple that puts her into a death-like sleep. As we know the poison apple eventually leads to Snow White's rescue by the handsome prince. We could interpret that the perfume (which is, of course, named Poison) is to represent the means by which any woman using the perfume will eventually be rescued by her handsome man and live happily ever after.

Alternately, the symbolism in the ad may refer to the story of Eden. The shape and shrouding around the arm makes the arm appear somewhat snake-patterned. The snake may be offering the forbidden fruit (often thought to be an apple) to the Woman. The darkness of her clothing and the dark make-up on her face might indicate the darker realm or the evil side offering the apple to Woman who, of course, according to the story, could not resist.

This analysis is quite interesting in that it begins to decode deeper meanings in the ad and to look at cultural myths and symbols. These stories and myths shape our perceptions and also form the body of knowledge from which advertising creative people draw as they solve advertising and marketing problems. In textual analysis, the text is not considered to have a single meaning but rather is capable of being read in different ways by different people (Fiske, 1987). Since we can never know the art director and copywriter's original meaning for the symbols in ads, we can only guess at their significance. In fact, many current advertising campaigns (the Guess Jeans campaign, for example) encourage the reader to "read into" the text to discover

the meaning. Rather than ignoring the deeper cultural and symbolic elements in ads, textual analysis forces the student to confront the creative process head on; to attempt to reconstruct the creative process which produced the advertisement.

By beginning to "undress the ad" the student moves from the role of passive receiver of the message to active unraveler of the creative process. Advertisements are not a reflection of natural reality, but a constructed version of reality. The art director and the copywriter construct the advertisement from words and visuals. In textual analysis students are asked to deconstruct this reality.

The following is a selection of textual analyses by advertising students. These have been divided into categories including: mythology and symbolism; cultural stereotypes of men and women; and sexual fantasy. These examples offer a diverse range of differing social and cultural themes.

LIVE THE LIFE.
Giorgio
BEVERLY HILLS
Giorgio
BEVERLY HILLS
Exclusively at Giorgio Beverly Hills New York and select stores. Call for our Fragrance Special. Sat. 1-8. (310)8[illegible] am time

Georgio Perfume Ad
from
Vogue

It's becoming apparent through these analyses that male and female relationships nearly monopolize the personal interaction facet of advertisements (not that this is really a revelation). I'm realizing how difficult it is to find ads with other types of of relationships : between members of the same sex (i.e. friendships); between parents and children; between elderly members of society and younger adults, etc.

Here is an example of the prototype. Perfume bottles personifying an opposite-sex relationship. The fragrance bottles unmistakably play the roles of a female leaning against a male in a harmonious, complementary relationship. The "male" figure is characterized by a strong, silent "air" (can you see the solid broad shoulders?). The "female" figure is characterized by a strong femininity (note the curvaceous shape of the crystal bottle). The woman's form appears comfortable leaning on the "man's" but it is by choice. Although precarious (if the green bottle moved away...an element of risk), the "woman" still stands on a strong, lofty foundation. She is trusting, but not dependent. Who says that pictures don't speak louder than words?

FOR GLASSES THIS SPOTLESS...

SUNLIGHT

POWDER OR LIQUID.
NOTHING GETS GLASSES
MORE SPOTLESS!

©1989 Lever Brothers Company.

Sun Light Detergent Ad
from
Gentleman's Quarterly

This particular ad makes a definite statement about the changing roles of men in American society. Five years ago, this ad would never have been aimed at a male target audience. Until recently it would have been unthinkable to show a man acting like a "harried housewife" over the dilemma of spotty glasses. Dishwashing has traditionally been "women's work". But even more than being offensive to men, this ad would have been irrelevant even a few year back because men did not represent a large enough consumer segment for dishwashing detergent.

Today, with changing demographic trends more men are doing dishes and doing the shopping for dishwashing detergent. This is a result of more women working and men having to help out with the housework. In addition, more men are living on their own due to later marriages and the increasing divorce rate which puts men back into bachelorhood.

However, while doing dishes is becoming a reality to more and more men, there still may be some remaining "women's work" stigma attached to it. Therefore, ads such as this must be careful to preserve the male ego when advertising domestic products. For instance, notice that the men in the ad are cartoon characters, not real men. It's almost as if it would be too offensive for men to see a real man sweating nervously about spotty glasses. The cartoon allows the reader to observe the problem and product benefits without becoming too involved in the domestic element.

It's obvious that the man in this picture is meticulous about his housework, judging from the clean room in the background and his concern over the spotty glasses. However, the ad takes steps to alleviate the male consumers worries that this domestic quality is infringing on their masculinity. For example, the male buddies seen through the window are carrying a pizza and a football. They're obviously coming over to have a manly night of football with the guys, since football, a traditional sign of masculinity is shown on the television in the background, The main character is also dressed in a tie. It looks as if he has just gotten home from work. All of these subtle factors work together on housekeeping male consumers to soften the blows of housekeeping on their masculinity.

THE CLASSIC AMERICAN BEAUTY

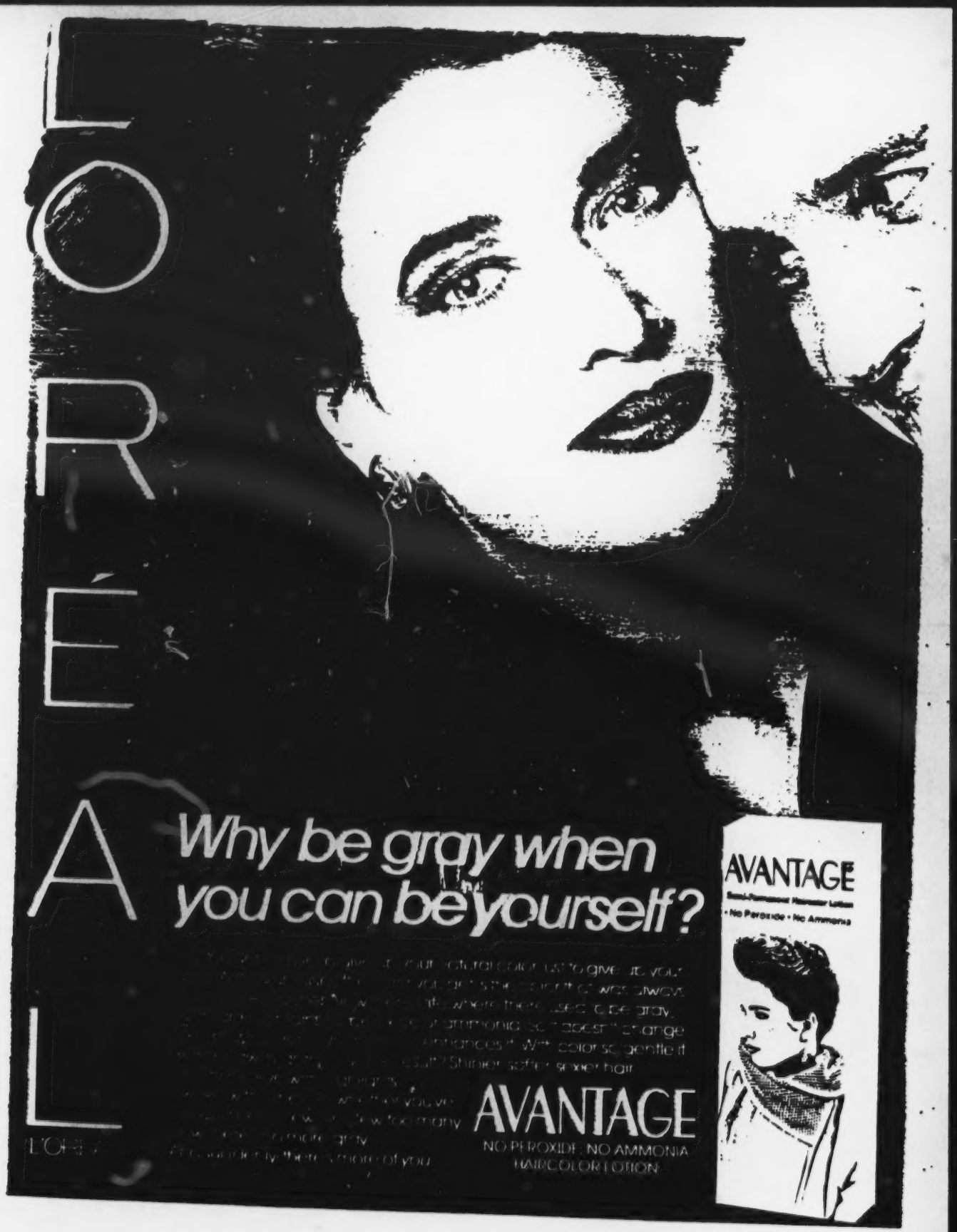
Lauren Perfume
from
Mademoiselle

This ad for Lauren perfume is full of social and cultural messages. It sets a standard of beauty for women in our culture. The headline: "The Great American Beauty" has many meanings. The most obvious meaning is that the model shown in the photograph is the "Classic American Beauty". This says a lot about the beauty standards that American society sets for women. Webster's Dictionary defines "classic" as "a standard of excellence" and "notably being the best example." So the headline is saying that the woman in the picture is the standard for and the best example of what beautiful is in America.

But one careful look at the model shows how restrictive and prohibitive this standard of beauty is. For instance, the woman is white. This automatically excludes any American woman who is of African, Hispanic or Oriental background. The model is also thin, with flawless skin, beautiful her and perfect cheek bones. From the way she is dressed she appears to be financially well off. She also appears to be wealthy because she's lounging on what appears to be a large ranch, due to the fence and open land in the background. The dog she is holding and the ranch setting are both symbols of the "classic" American dream. However, they represent a way of life that is more idealistic than realistic for most women.

If the model's race doesn't isolate her from the majority of women in America, all of the above-named factors do. In fact, the ad is heralding as "Classic American Beauty" a look and a lifestyle that are unobtainable for most American women.

This ad is subconsciously attempting to attribute the model's beauty to Lauren perfume by placing them in close proximity. But in reality what does a perfume contribute to a woman's beauty? Perfume changes the way a woman smells not how she looks. Just because a woman wears Lauren does not mean she'll look like the woman in the ad. The danger of this ad lies in the fact that it is equating the standard of American beauty to the ability to purchase Lauren perfume.


L'ORÉAL
Why be gray when you can be yourself?
AVANTAGE
NO PEROXIDE NO AMMONIA
HAIRCOLOR LOTION
AVANTAGE
• No Peroxide • No Ammonia

L'Oreal Hair Coloring
from
Ladies Home Journal

With ads like this women will never feel comfortable growing older, or accepting themselves, for that matter. "Why be gray when you can be yourself?" it asks. What it is really saying is, "Why be yourself when you can use haircoloring?" If you have gray hair and you're not yourself, who are you? Who exactly do you become when you chemically alter your hair's color? (obviously, not yourself).

A more critical analysis of this advertisement involves evaluating the example presented. The woman pictured looks vibrant and attractive by American standards (accented, of course, by the male face admiring her). She looks as though she put careful effort into her appearance -- styled hair, full make-up, jewelry. The model fits the standardized "American beauty code."

The copy is the most manipulative component. Gray is not considered a natural color for hair. There are parallels drawn between gray and death, "now there's life where there used to be gray." Or how about, "so it doesn't change the natural color of your hair..."? The final sentence is a blatant denial of reality. It reads, "And suddenly, there's more of you." This is obviously a contradiction. There is, in actuality, less of you and more of L'Oreal chemicals in your hair.

The point that I wish to make about this advertisement is that consumers should learn to evaluate ads and to think rationally about products' claims and approaches.

DRAKKAR
Feel the power
Guy Laroche

Drakkar Cologne
from
Gentleman's Quarterly

This ad for Drakkar cologne radiates powerful images of male strength and authority. It does this at the surface level and also on a much deeper, symbolic level. Taking the ad at face value, the slogan "Feel the Power", connotes male strength. The downhill skier, the archer and the speedboat are all undeniable symbols of male brawn and energy.

However to stop at this surface level interpretation would be a mistake because there is more powerful symbolism in the copy and visual. Looking at the ad more symbolically, strong themes of male dominance and sexuality emerge. The photographs in the ad are loaded with sexual symbolism. The straight, pointed, erect positioning of the skis, the arm holding the arrow and the speedboat are all powerful phallic imagery. But it is not only the shape of the objects that are laced with sexual connotation, the motion of the objects is what makes the phallic image domineering. The speedboat and the skier are shown as power in motion, thrusting, driven, and unstoppable energy. And since these objects represent a phallus, this powerful motion symbolizes very aggressive and domineering sexual acts.

The arm holding the bow and arrow has a slightly different meaning. The energy and motion of the arrow is just on the verge of being released. The tension in the man's muscles is evident as he holds back the arrow, waiting and controlling the moment of release. This photograph symbolizes sexual energy being held back, whereas the other two photos show sexual energy being released. However, all three pictures are symbols of forceful sexual activity. Whether the symbolic sexual act is taking place or about to take place, it is the male sexual organ that is portrayed as overpowering and in control.

The positioning of the man and woman's arms in the bottom right image could be interpreted as symbolizing a potentially violent act. The bottle looks like some type of cudgel being raised as if to strike the woman. The position of the woman's hand on the man's wrist looks as if she is trying to stop him from striking her. When analyzed at this more symbolic level, the slogan, "Feel the Power" now takes on a much different meaning . The "power" is aggressive and sexually dominant male power. The ad tells men that with Draakar they can "feel the power" of being forceful, sexually overpowering, and master of the sexual situation.

CONCLUSION

The most important thing to stress about using textual analysis to decode advertisements is that its primary purpose is to improve critical thinking. Advertising educators can render their students a great service by expecting them to go beyond the surface of an advertisement and bring a critical analysis to the ad. By so doing, students become aware not merely of the "advertisement as sales tool" but also of the "advertisement as a cultural artifact" that recreates the social and cultural context from which it originated. Advertisements shape human consciousness and reflect the values and mores of the society. Deconstruction holds great promise for raising the standards of professionalism in advertising and for shaping a more scholarly approach to the study of advertising.

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